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ABSTRACT

The way that the participation of trustees in the processes of voluntary accreditation can help them in overseeing institutional autonomy and integrity is discussed, based on the work of a subcommittee of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. In addition, recommendations for board participation in institutional and specialized (programmatic) accreditation are offered. It is noted that accreditation is a means of accomplishing a major part of the central business of the boards for undertaking institutional planning and periodic evaluation. Attention is directed to the need for maintenance of high standards and the safeguarding of the integrity of self-regulation. Recommendations include the following: board members should be informed of the history, current practice, and strengths and weaknesses of their institutional accrediting associations; board members should actively participate in institutional self-study; the board should be informed of the objectives and activities of the visiting team and should meet with the team; the board should review the team's final report and help implement approved recommendations; and board members should join administrators, faculty members, and representatives of the specialized agencies in the periodic review of specialized accreditation practices. (SW)

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The Board's Role in Accreditation

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A Report of the AGB Subcommittee on the Role of Trustees in Institutional and Specialized Accreditation

2

The Board's Role in Accreditation

In 1981, a special subcommittee of the Public Policy Committee of the AGB Board of Directors was appointed to determine: 1) how the Association can educate its member trustees on the purposes of accreditation; and 2) how the Association and members of governing boards can participate constructively in the activities and procedures of accreditation with the objective of maintaining educational quality and proper institutional autonomy.

The members of the Subcommittee

on the Role of Trustees in Institutional and Specialized Accreditation were:

Clark Kerr
(Chairperson)
Manager Emeritus,
Swarthmore College

Merrimon Cuninggim
Trustee, Vanderbilt University
Trustee, Duke University

Ann Ida Gannon, *BVM*
Trustee, St. Louis University
Trustee, St. Michael's College
Trustee, Ursuline College

David M. Lascell, Esq.
Trustee and Chairman, Wells College

Mary Louise Petersen
Former Member,
Iowa State Board of Regents

Samuel J. Silberman
Trustee, Fairleigh Dickinson University

J.L. Zwingle
(Consultant)
Former President of AGB

Nancy R. Axelrod
(Staff)
Vice President for Programs
and Public Policy, AGB

The subcommittee met six times over a period of 16 months. A survey was conducted to explore the range of trustee practices in institutional and specialized accreditation, and several leaders in the field of accreditation were consulted. This report was prepared by the subcommittee and adopted by the AGB Board of Directors on November 5, 1982. Although the Association of Governing Boards will continue to address the issues in this report, these recommendations complete the work of the subcommittee.

The members of the subcommittee express their gratitude for the assistance of Nancy R. Axelrod and J.L. Zwingle and for their diligence in assuming the major responsibility for writing this report.

Unlike many countries that depend on a centralized ministry for quality control of their educational enterprise, the United States uses a nongovernmental, self-regulatory system of assessing the institutions that make up its pluralistic system of postsecondary education. The ultimate responsibility for the integrity and autonomy of colleges and universities rests with the lay members of governing boards. Administrators and faculty members contribute to this effort by enforcing standards and reviewing educational effectiveness. The academic community also participates in the process of accreditation through voluntary associations of institutions and programs that seek to assess and enhance the quality of an institution or program and assure the public that their members are operating in the public interest.

The intent of this report is to show how the participation of trustees in the processes of voluntary accreditation can give them an immediate and effective grasp of their critical task of overseeing institutional autonomy and integrity. Further, it will be seen that neglect of this opportunity by trustees may itself be a serious threat to the future of American higher education and two of its unique and essential features: self-regulation and lay trusteeship. A fresh look at the purposes and procedures of accreditation can take colleges and universities a long way toward regaining control of their own destinies and finding a renewed sense of common purpose among institutions of all types. Failure among governing boards to take seriously the import of a strong and effective system of nongovernmental accreditation could weaken the American educational enterprise by encouraging governmental bodies to assume the responsibility for control and assessment.

In the field of voluntary accreditation, there are two major types of activity: 1) institutional accrediting; and 2) specialized or programmatic accrediting. The first of these is carried on by the six regional associations of colleges and

schools and the four national institutional accrediting bodies. The second type is carried on by some 38 national organizations concerned with professional study (law, medicine, and the like) or with occupational or disciplinary programs, institutions, or units within institutions. Both groups are self-governing membership organizations. An umbrella organization, The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), certifies the legitimacy of accrediting organizations and coordinates and maintains communication among these groups.

The original interest in institutional accrediting arose over transfer of credits and thus focused on academic standards (requirements) among institutions. In the less than a century of its history, institutional accrediting has evolved through several stages, from the first quantitative measures of faculty training, faculty-student ratios, volumes in the library, to more broad-scale concerns about clarity of purpose, consistency of performance, and assessment of outcomes—all these pointed toward questions of institutional viability, integrity, and similar concerns.

It was once true that after an institution received accreditation there was little effort to review its performance; but that time is long past. Typical practice today is for institutions not only to be reviewed regularly but for interim reports to be made. Moreover, there is an increasing practice to require special reports within a range of six to 24 months, depending on the nature of the problem. Despite these changes in practice, it is still falsely assumed by many that, once accredited, member institutions have few or no further demands to meet.

The function of the review in the process is not only continuance of accreditation but institutional enhancement. Thus it is an exercise in 1) self-examination and 2) peer review, through which process even the most distinguished institution may discover for itself certain areas of needed improvement

and, with the help of well-selected visitors, may gain new insight on some of the inevitable problems of maintaining good practice.

It is important for governing boards to take special interest in this self-assessment. Institutions today confront a set of forces that threaten the self-determination of institutions and tend to weaken voluntary accreditation. These forces are to be found partly in the nature of the current national situation and partly in the relations with governmental agencies, both state and federal, as they deal with colleges and universities. In these and other instances, there are growing criticisms of voluntary accreditation and expressions of doubt that the system will any longer suffice for the future.

As for the national situation, not much need be repeated here: The flood tide of students has begun to recede; the national economy has weakened. Competition among institutions has increased. Public criticism of education has mounted. New practices and programs among the colleges have raised questions about the quality of certain offerings. Dubious advertising and other promotional schemes have led to suspicions of fraud. The swing toward enrollment in public institutions is marked, and the plight of the private sector in education is a continuing topic of discussion.

Concurrently institutions must deal with renewed activity on the part of state higher education departments and other agencies of state government, not to mention the continued role of the federal government in all fields of education. Many feel that the period of enrollment decline and program consolidation we enter will encourage state government to play a more aggressive role in program review and in shaping critical policy decisions in postsecondary education. In the midst of this expansion of governmental role the criticisms of voluntary accreditation have mounted, most especially from governmental sources. At times it seems

that validity of peer review is acceptable only when negative decisions are reached. Confidentiality is viewed as connivance. And somehow the protection of the public interest is seen as a governmental function, beyond the reach of the private sector or a system of peer review otherwise accepted in such fields as medicine and law.

In the literature of accreditation several thoughtful analyses have been published, setting forth clearly the important differences in the functions of state government, federal government, and the voluntary associations. It would be well for members of governing boards to acquaint themselves with at least some of these publications.[1] But the message for trustees to hear is not a call to battle against state and federal government. It is to emphasize the need for them to grasp the significance of voluntary accreditation and to seek means by which their own share of responsibility here can better be discharged.

As for the criticisms of institutional accrediting, limitations of space will permit only a summary. One favorite complaint is that the membership of regional associations is an "old boys' club," wherein old routines prevail and nothing new ever blossoms; that the procedures are slow and cumbersome, obstructing prompt action when needed; and that reviews are scheduled too seldom for any sustained benefit. Another criticism concerns the proliferation of specialized accreditation that tends to emphasize particular programs at the possible expense of the institution as a whole—and in fact may impinge on institutional independence. It might be useful to deal with these criticisms as part of this report, but suffice it to suggest that trustees should study and discuss these matters.

[1] Several helpful publications are listed in The Balance Wheel published by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA). Single copies of this booklet are available free from COPA, Suite 760, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036. Directories of the accrediting powers can also be obtained from the regional institutional accrediting bodies and the specialized accrediting bodies listed in the COPA brochure.

The point is not to explain or defend the procedures of the voluntary accrediting groups, but to emphasize that the process of accreditation is important to every college and university, that it bears heavily upon the issues of institutional vitality, integrity, and self-determination. Any pressure toward intrusion by state or federal agencies constitutes ultimately a threat to the future of non-governmental accreditation and the role of trusteeship. The best safeguard against that untoward development is in the readiness of governing boards to utilize the procedures of accreditation *as a means of accomplishing a major part of the central business of the boards themselves* for undertaking: 1) institutional planning; and 2) periodic evaluation.

Because accreditation is concerned largely with academic matters, some consider the lay trustee to be unqualified to participate significantly and that his/her attempts to do so may be diversionary, obstructive, meddlesome, even dangerous. Moreover, the process of accreditation and review is slow and time-consuming, demanding more than is reasonable to expect from the typical member of the governing board. Further, within large state-wide systems or at least multiple institutions under their supervision, the boards could never be expected to scrutinize individual institutions very closely.

Leaving aside for the moment the questions of time, workload, and specific approaches for appropriate trustee involvement, let us consider a matter of principle: At the core of accreditation are two concerns that directly overlap important trustee duties cited earlier—institutional planning and periodic evaluation. True, these are not functions of the individual board members but central to the corporate responsibility of boards. For trustees to give cursory attention to staff reports or oral comments on such matters is to neglect the very essence of the enterprise. In the accrediting process, governing boards could discover immediate as-

sistance and direct access to this vitally important task.

An important decision then is this: How will the board and administration share the activity involved in self-study, the maintenance of high standards, the reach for improvement, and the safeguarding of the integrity of self-regulation, all of which underlie the accreditation process? The following recommendations for board participation in institutional and specialized accreditation are offered to guide those trustees and chief executives at institutions which do not have a level of board involvement sufficient to render the board accountable in this self-regulatory activity. A variety of effective practices have been identified in the course of the AGB subcommittee's investigation.

These recommendations should be reviewed and adapted to fit the needs, size, and complexity of the institution; the style and organization of its board; and the requirements of the individual accrediting organization(s) to which the institution belongs. Trustees and regents must look to their presidents and chancellors to help them participate constructively in accreditation as stewards and policy makers rather than part-time administrators, meddlers or academic specialists.

Recommendations for board participation in institutional accreditation

RECOMMENDATION I - Members of the board should, 1) be informed of the history, current practice, and strengths and weaknesses of their institutional accrediting associations; and 2) participate, along with their administrators and faculty members, in their activities.

Current accreditation practices have been criticized by educators, public officials, and even those who administer the work of the accrediting bodies. Like the colleges and universities they accredit, the regional associations undergo self-study and concern themselves with self-improvement. As members of these associations, trustees, administra-

tors, and faculty members should help evaluate and strengthen accrediting criteria and standards.

One of the most effective forms of participation, other than carrying out the necessary procedures as institutional candidates for accreditation or reaccreditation, is service on accrediting teams. Trustees should encourage their faculty and administrators to serve on the visiting teams for other institutions, and they should be willing to contribute time themselves as public members of teams or the commissions that govern the regionals if they are qualified to do so.

To prepare for such additional service to higher education, trustees should be aware of the ongoing activities of their institution's regional association. This can be done by reading the associations' newsletters, reviewing policy documents, attending membership meetings, or asking the president to keep the board apprised of these matters.

Some of the regional associations have developed video tapes, workshops, and other training devices to help educate trustees and others about their purposes and practices. At the very least, a discussion of accreditation should be placed on the board agenda well in advance of the self-study process to make sure the board is aware of: a) the objectives, scope, and cost of this activity; and b) its role in the process.

RECOMMENDATION II - The board should actively participate in the institutional self-study.

The self-study is at the heart of the accreditation process, and it is an exercise that should be welcomed by the board as complementary to its responsibilities for: approving institutional mission and goals; ensuring sound institutional planning and financial management; and evaluating institutional performance. It should be viewed as an integral part of institutional planning rather than simply as a means of complying with accrediting requirements. In addition to assessing its own

effectiveness as a part of the self-study of the institution's governance, board members should be willing to roll up their sleeves in working with other aspects of the self-study as suggested by the chief executive. The final self-study report which is sent to the accreditation team may be too voluminous to send to each board member. The responsibility of reviewing the report might be delegated to a board committee or a summary of the findings could be shared with each trustee.

Trustees have often served as members of the institutional steering committee typically organized to coordinate the self-study. Board members may also be asked to complete questionnaires administered by the steering committee, and board officers are sometimes invited to review drafts of the results of the self-study. Depending on the organization of the board, it may be useful to assign a standing (e.g., academic affairs) or specially appointed board committee to work with the self-study. Trustees can also be helpful in identifying others who can contribute to this stage of the accreditation cycle such as members of visiting committees and advisory councils.

The self-study process is too often a sometime thing, whereas it should be continuous. If indeed the self-study does become continuous, the periodic review is made all the more valuable and much less demanding. Yet even among the most prestigious of institutions, it occasionally has been found that serious neglect of these functions comes to light when the external review takes place.

RECOMMENDATION III - The board should be informed of the objectives and activities of the visiting team.

If one accepts the proposition that the present procedures for accreditation can and should be strengthened but that the overall responsibility for this activity should continue to be non-governmental, the accreditation team which visits the campus should not be treated as an unwelcome group of ex-

ternal examiners. The board can help the president set the stage to receive the team as a group of peers whose candor and objectivity will help the institution pursue its own goals of self-improvement, self-renewal and rededication to quality programs and services.

If misgivings about the team are based on ignorance, orientation programs should be planned for campus constituencies to explore the function, nature and value of accreditation. If they are based on dissatisfaction with the accreditation criteria of the agency or the methods employed by previous teams, the board should be aware of these concerns and be prepared to consider recommendations for improving the situation.

RECOMMENDATION IV - The board or its representatives should meet with the visiting team.

Accrediting teams which complete their campus visits without any direct communication with board members are likely to leave the institution with serious questions about board involvement in the governance process. The way in which the trustees interact with the members of the visiting team should be a function of the requirements of the accrediting associations (some routinely schedule meetings with board members) and/or the wishes and independent initiative of the board and chief executive. In some instances, board officers or the members of the executive committee are interviewed. In other cases, all of the members of the board are encouraged to meet with the visiting team to discuss board priorities, long-range planning and other matters.

RECOMMENDATION V - The board should review the final report of the accrediting team, evaluate its findings, and help implement those recommendations it approves.

The final report of the accrediting team may call for significant institutional changes and financial expenditures.

Therefore, the board must understand the rationale for the recommendations before it can approve the changes in institutional organization or practices deemed necessary to meet the association's standards as expressed by the visiting team. Once the board has considered the final report and discussed it with the chief executive, it should review carefully its role in the implementation of the recommendations, encourage and authorize the administration to implement approved recommendations, and ask the president to provide it with periodic progress reports to monitor these activities.

The internal self-study and the reports of visiting teams provide ready means for governing board review and reaction—not of course in full detail but in such manner as to provide responsible insight, foresight, and oversight. The planning and review of institutional matters revealed by such reports should be foremost in the concerns of faculty, administration and board members—a natural medium of mutual interests. To engage periodically in this exercise does not commit the board member to spending an inordinate amount of time or to a substitution of lay judgment for that of the expert. It does commit the trustee to pay close attention to the recommendations of accrediting bodies and the reactions of faculty and administration to these recommendations.

Recommendations for board participation in specialized accreditation

As a review of specific programs within an institution, specialized accreditation requires perhaps a different kind of trustee participation from that recommended for institutional accreditation. Nevertheless, the relationship of specialized accreditation to trustee concerns such as academic standards and the substantial financial and personnel costs involved in some of the specialized reviews warrants a role for trustees in this self-regulatory activity as well. In the minds of many, this is an area where the board must delegate the lion's share

On Multicampus Systems

Boards responsible for multicampus systems may shrink from any suggestion of involvement in accreditation activities because of the apparent magnitude of the task. Certainly there is a special problem here. But such boards should ask themselves and their central administrators to think about possible approaches to this task without inviting complete overload.

Regular reports from the system staff can help central boards to be reasonably informed about major findings of accrediting teams. Many systems have advisory committees of some sort, affiliated with the units within the system. These groups could well be included in some part of the larger issues of assessment. Where such a suggestion will not fit, there is the possibility of special committees co-opted by the board to examine some elements in accreditation reports and to form some judgment about matters worthy of attention by the governing board.

While recognizing the variations in multicampus structure and board organization, the board must be involved in accreditation in ways suggested by these recommendations.

of the institutional responsibility to its administration. But it must also expect the president or chancellor to keep it well informed of the policy implications of specialized activities.

RECOMMENDATION I - Trustees should be familiar with: a) the purpose and general requirements of the agencies that conduct specialized accreditation reviews at their institution(s); (b) the schedule and general activities for each review; and (c) the estimated direct and overhead costs of such reviews.

Keeping board members informed as

to which agencies visit the campus, how often they come, what criteria they impose, and what this means to the institution is a much greater task at larger, more complex institutions that may participate in several specialized reviews. It need not be burdensome if the chief executive presents periodic progress reports to the board in summary fashion. If a board committee structure exists, it may be appropriate for the academic affairs committee to review these reports on behalf of the board and for the financial or executive committee to review the financial commitment of the institution to the specialized accreditation activities. At those institutions where the cost of specialized reviews will represent a significant portion of the budget, the board may be asked to approve whether specialized agencies will be invited to consider accreditation of new programs, or to review the cost/benefit ratio of existing arrangements with specialized agencies.

RECOMMENDATION II - Boards should ask their chief executives to share with them highlights of the findings of the specialized visiting team.

Typically, individual trustees do not review the reports made by specialized agencies, but the board's responsibility for approving the educational program should encompass periodic assessments of the results of the specialized reviews. In some cases, board members who are professionals in the field of review may be asked to participate in the self-study or the visit of the team. The method will depend on the size of the institution and the organization of the board, but all approaches should provide the board with an overview of the findings of the specialized visiting team, the requirements of the agencies they represent, and the consequences for the institution.

RECOMMENDATION III - Board members should participate, along with their administrators and faculty members and

representatives of the specialized agencies, in the periodic review of specialized accreditation practices.

Governing boards are in a good position to appraise the work of specialized agencies because trustees are expected to make decisions *on the basis of the welfare of the entire institution* rather than on the needs of a specific discipline. Specialized accrediting agencies can influence teaching load requirements, budgeting standards, kinds of advanced degrees required of the faculty, the length of the program, and other academic policies. These requirements should be measured against overall institutional mission and priorities established by the board and administration rather than used as the sole basis for shaping the academic program. Board members can help distinguish between those requirements of the agency that represent encroachment in institutional governance from those that encourage needed program improvement.

Trustees can encourage specialized teams to relate their individual program objectives to overall institutional objectives. Trustees can also encourage interagency cooperation when it is possible to arrange for complementary time schedules among specialized agencies and to coordinate specialized and institutional accreditation cycles. Board members can make a contribution as members of specialized visiting teams if they have expertise in the particular field of inquiry.

This booklet is the fourteenth in a series, AGB Board Publications, designed to give both new and experienced trustees concise, summary information on subjects and issues of high interest to governing boards. Titles in the series are:

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16

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